Name: _____ Date: _____

Beans and Peace

Reading level 11 (7th grade) · 997 words

It is a well-known fact among mice that every cousin has a better life than you do. Country Mouse, who lived in a snug hole under a hedge at the edge of a wheat field, had always believed that his cousin in town was the luckiest creature alive. Town Mouse, for his part, believed the same thing about himself, which made for a good deal of misunderstanding whenever the two of them wrote letters. Each cousin's letters were full of cheerful, careful lies about how comfortable he was.

When Town Mouse arrived for his visit, he stood in the doorway of the hole and gazed at its low ceiling and its single candle with an expression of gentle, tragic pity. Country Mouse noticed it, of course, but he was too well brought up to say anything. Instead, he fetched his very best: a dish of beans, a heap of barley and a crust of bread so dry that it crackled when he set it down. It was, in its way, a speech of welcome, and it had taken him most of the morning to arrange.

Town Mouse ate one bean, slowly, in the manner of someone being brave. "How do you stand it, cousin?" he asked at last. "Day after day, nothing but seeds and mud and silence. Come to town, and I will show you what a mouse can make of his life." Country Mouse was a polite creature, and the word "silence" had not sounded so bad to him, but he said yes, because it is very difficult to refuse an invitation after somebody has been so politely rude to your lunch.

The journey took a day and a night. By the time they slipped through a crack in a grand brick house, the moon was high, and Country Mouse's legs were trembling with tiredness. His cousin, however, was in splendid spirits. He pointed out the sights, the polished stair rail, the rug with the pattern like a garden, and the tall clock, as though he had built them all himself. He was beginning to enjoy being the guide. He was looking forward to the reaction, which was going to be quite different from what he expected.

Then they reached the dining room, and Country Mouse stopped dead. The long table was still dressed for a banquet. There were slices of cake thick with cream, cheeses the color of the sun, glass dishes of cherries, jellies that trembled when the table was touched, and a plate of small cookies shaped like stars. "Help yourself," said Town Mouse, with a careless wave, as if he were handing out the moon. Country Mouse could not remember when anyone had last told him to help himself to anything but a bean.

Country Mouse had never in his whole life seen so much food in one place, and for a moment he forgot to breathe. He climbed up and took a bite of cake that was larger than his head. It tasted like warm summer and honey, and for about ten delicious seconds, he understood

exactly what his cousin had been talking about. Then the door opened, and everything changed. Those ten seconds were the finest of his life, and he never forgot them, which was the trouble.

In walked the house cat. She was big and golden-eyed, and she moved with the unhurried walk of a creature who owns the place. We may as well say, since the mice never knew it, that she had come only for her saucer of milk. But a mouse does not stop to ask a cat her plans. "Run!" squeaked Town Mouse, and they ran, down the table leg, across a very long stretch of floor and into a hole no wider than a teacup handle. They entered it at the same instant, with a good deal of squeaking.

They spent the next quarter of an hour squeezed together in a hole in the wall, with their ears pressed flat and their hearts hammering. At last the cat strolled away with her saucer. Town Mouse brushed down his coat and said, in a shaky voice that was supposed to sound casual, "Nothing to it. It happens all the time. One gets used to it." Country Mouse, who did not think anyone could get used to it, said nothing, and in the silence the tall clock struck midnight.

It happened again before the cookies, when two large dogs thundered into the room, barking at nothing in particular. Country Mouse could not have said how he reached the hole. He only knew that he was sitting in it, in the dark, trembling from ear to tail, and that the beans in his cousin's pantry were suddenly not at all the problem. For the first time in his life, he understood what his cousin's fancy house really cost. It was far more than any mouse should pay for a slice of cake.

"Cousin," he said, when he could speak, "you have a magnificent table. But I find that I cannot swallow a thing when I am listening for claws. Peace is the best seasoning, and you do not seem to have any. I am going home." And he did, by moonlight, all the way, with his small heart growing lighter at every step. The road home looked longer than it had before, but he did not mind. The stars were out, and he was in no danger from any of them.

By morning, Country Mouse was in his own bed, with a dish of beans warming beside him and the crickets singing outside. They were not grand beans, and it was not a grand room. But no cat came through the door, and he found, rather to his surprise, that it was the best meal he had ever eaten. Town Mouse, it should be added, came to visit again the following spring, brought his own cushion and was never heard to complain about the quiet.

Questions

1. What did Town Mouse think about Country Mouse's home?

A. He pitied it
B. He wanted to move in
C. He found it grand

2. What had the cat really come to the dining room for?

A. To catch the mice
B. To sleep on the table
C. For her saucer of milk

3. What did Country Mouse call the best seasoning?

A. Cheese
B. Peace
C. Salt

4. What does "banquet" mean in this story?

A. A quiet nap
B. A grand feast
C. A kind of cake

5. Why was Country Mouse's meal at home the best he had ever eaten?

A. He could eat it without feeling afraid
B. It was larger than the cake
C. His cousin cooked it

Words to know

misunderstanding: a mix-up
tragic: very sad
banquet: a grand feast
unhurried: calm and slow
seasoning: flavor added to food

Answer key: Beans and Peace

1. A. He pitied it
2. C. For her saucer of milk
3. B. Peace
4. B. A grand feast
5. A. He could eat it without feeling afraid